

**Remarks of U.S. Representative Martin Heinrich (NM-01) – As Prepared for Delivery
Address to University of New Mexico Fall 2009 Commencement Ceremony
Friday, December 18, 2009
Tingley Colliseum at Expo New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM**

President Schmidly, regents, administrators, faculty and friends, family and guests, all of you out there who helped pay the bills along the way, including my own parents who are with us today, and most especially, the reason we are here today, the members of the graduating class of 2009:

Let me start by expressing my gratitude at having been given the honor of addressing you today. I'm deeply touched by this opportunity to speak to the graduating class of the University of New Mexico. Since 1889, UNM has been the corner stone of higher learning in our community. Universities are places of understanding – spaces where, as was once said, “those who hate ignorance may strive to know, where those who perceive truth may strive to make others see.” Central New Mexico is truly a richer community because we are home to New Mexico's flagship university and so I thank you.

For today's graduates, the significance of this commencement is notable. Today is the culmination and reward of many late nights in the depths of Zimmerman Library, the expiration of your access to the delicious meals at La Posada, and maybe even a few warm afternoons skipping class laying out in the sun by the duck pond. Most importantly, today's commencement is an exciting rite of passage for each of you. This is the one time that you will experience this very conscious moment in life – one that has been preceded by a tremendous amount of hard work, transformation and the countless memories that brought you to this moment in time.

Those deeper aspects of your education will stay with each of you for the rest of your lives, but at this moment, I will do my best to enhance this once in a lifetime experience.

What strikes me most about a graduation like this is that today you are leaving a world of measurement in which it's easy for you to know where you stand with the help of grades and test scores – one in which, at the end of each semester, you could log on to “myUNM” and see how well you did in your classes. From now on, you'll have only yourselves and your higher power to rely on for judgment and knowing where you stand in life. In addition, rather than being on a 3 or 4 year timeframe, time will begin to fly by without measure, and before you know it you'll be many years beyond your graduation. So graduates, there's no better time than today to step up to the plate and decide to take the world on.

That is where I hope to be of some useful advice today.

I may still be a member of the United States Congress' “Thirty-Something” Caucus, but in my lifetime I have learned some key lessons. If there's one that I'd like to emphasize, it's that our world desperately needs good people to assert themselves, not to politely wait their turn to be leaders, not to be intimidated by obstacles like seniority, and we certainly need fewer people who standby and accept a status quo that they do not believe in. What our world needs is for you to move beyond any self-doubt and step up to be of service to those around you. We live in a

rapidly transforming 21st Century world that means opportunities come and go quickly, and don't often come back around. So I encourage you not to second guess yourselves and to seize the opportunities in front of you.

There is simply too much at stake for young leaders not to assert themselves now. Instead, I want to tell you to be bold and follow your passion. If there ever was one, the time to be a spectator to life is over. Too often, I've seen talented people aim below their ability. You have shown that you have the work ethic, the optimism and the talent to succeed – and that's what our world needs. You are on the right track to do something meaningful with your life and your career – starting today.

There is something to be said for allowing the wrongs of the world to invoke in each of us a bold and compassionate response to how we go about our day to day lives. All around us we see an imperfect world. It has been the actions of a few unwilling to accept the status quo that has brought our nation and our globe the progress we enjoy in this 21st Century. Of course, failure will be an inevitable part of your endeavors. It has been for all of us. But not enduring failure means you may never reach your potential or learn some of life's greatest lessons. Life is a lot like skiing and snowboarding. If you never fall down, you're probably not improving much.

So don't get discouraged. The higher calling of service to one another involves great uncertainty and risk, but there is deliverance in both the struggle and the accomplishment.

The true test of your character will be how you respond to those failures, with hope, resiliency, dignity and most importantly, learning. Each of you has been gifted with a higher education, and if effective your learning has opened your eyes to the imperfections of our world. As a result, I hope that it may prove hard for each of you to sleep at night without knowing that you've done something meaningful that day to make the world a better place.

Here's one example of the spirit of "leadership through adversity" here in New Mexico. It was the 1930s when New Mexico's then-Congressman Dennis Chavez learned that a young girl in Roswell had not been allowed to swim in a public pool because of her Hispanic ancestry. As a result, Chavez took up the cause of an "Equal Rights Amendment" to the U.S. Constitution. His bill failed time and again over the course of decades, but Dennis Chavez made that struggle a central fight in his career in the Senate. Over time, he built the momentum for change. He died in 1962, just two years before the final version of that initial effort, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, was adopted.

Today, he is remembered as a great American for his contribution to this great civil rights movement in our history. But what if Senator Chavez had settled for the status quo of those times? What if he sat by simply hoping that things would change for the better with time? What if the same went for those who fought fascism in Europe or fought for women's suffrage? What if Martin Luther King, Jr., or Harvey Milk, or Abraham Lincoln, or Lilly Ledbetter had settled for the status quo? Part of your potential to make a similar difference is that you have achieved a gift that can never be taken away, and I encourage you too to consider the awesome power and responsibility of your education. Nelson Mandela once said, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."

When I was just a few years out of college, I had a bit of a revelation about how best to apply myself and my education. On the morning of my birthday in the year 2000, my wife woke me up with the news that the Missouri Governor Mel Carnahan had died in a plane crash. In college I worked on Mr. Carnahan's campaign, and I looked up to him for the way that he pursued his principles in a quiet, unselfish way. His presence reminded me more of a Lutheran minister than a politician, and I respected his ethical, inclusive approach to public service. The night before he died I sat up watching Governor Carnahan debate his opponent for the U.S. Senate on CSPAN. Yes, I know watching CSPAN made me a nerd.

But, his sudden unexpected death hit home to me the fragility of life, as well as the need to seize every possible moment in front of us. That was the day I decided to run for public office. Since that time so much has happened around the world and in my own life. It's been said that we live in difficult times. You may have seen the recent cover of Time Magazine which referred to the 2000's as "the Decade from Hell". I don't need to tell you how serious things have been; a brief sampling of newspaper headlines tells the story well:

- September 12, 2001: "A New Day of Infamy."
- February 1, 2002: "Enron audit panel is scrutinized for its cozy ties with the firm."
- November 21, 2004: "[Iraq] War's Toll Respects Neither Youth nor Experience."
- November 30, 2005: "17th Street Canal levee was doomed."
- August 2, 2007: "Freeway bridge collapses into river during rush hour in Minneapolis."
- September 14, 2008: "Lehman files for bankruptcy; Merrill is sold."
- November 6, 2009: "Unemployment hits 10.2%"

There is no question that the challenges of this era are immense, but remember that you are graduating in a nation that has always overcome adversity, and that is full of innovation and rich in human capital. And through the hardship, one doesn't have to look far for inspiration and hope. Here are some headlines that illustrate the strength of human spirit during adversity:

- September 13, 2001: "On Doomed Flight, Passengers Vowed to Perish Fighting" A headline about the heroic passengers of United Flight 93, which went down in Shanksville, Pennsylvania.
- December 22, 2002: "Cynthia Cooper, Coleen Rowley and Sherron Watkins" together are named Time Magazine's "Person of the Year" for courageously blowing the whistle on what went wrong at WorldCom, Enron and the FBI.
- October 9, 2003: "Direct elections for president are held for the first time in Afghanistan."
- July 21, 2007: J.K. Rowling's "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows" becomes the fastest selling book in history, initially written while she was a single-mother, surviving through welfare.
- November 5, 2008: "Racial Barrier falls in Decisive Victory."
- January 16, 2009: "In a Split Second, a Pilot Becomes a Hero," – a headline about the Captain who successfully saved 155 lives when he landed US Airways Flight 1549 in the Hudson River.

Each of these stories demonstrates the inherent tendencies and natural strength of our fellow Americans in the face of adversity. In one way or another, each of these individuals served the greater good. As a country with significant influence in the world, we have a collective responsibility to set the course of history. I may be a little biased, but one of the greatest ways to do this is through participation in our country's Democracy. While I encourage you to participate actively in your Democracy, and I really want to see many of you run for elected office, I encourage you to look inward and find your own way to respond to the challenges of our time.

The spirit of service calls to every one of us, whether it be through military service, starting a business, mentoring youth, working with your neighborhood association, volunteering at your house of worship, or donating food to a food bank. The common thread is respect for human dignity and a desire to serve our fellow human beings.

By no means do we live in a perfect society with a faultless history, but like those who served before us, we have much to look forward to as future generations rise to meet the challenges of the day. Today, you are that future generation. Your time to rise to the challenge is now.

Tomorrow, you set out on a new and exciting journey, and ideally that journey will keep you in New Mexico. There is now a calling upon you. I hope you act boldly and courageously, using your education to contribute your part to a more perfect nation and a better world. It won't be long before those opportunities appear before you. Don't let them pass you by. After all, the rest of us are counting on you.

Thank you and congratulations to the Class of 2009.